

Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education December 2007 Monthly Case Report

The Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education began serving District residents on December 3. Each month the Ombudsman will provide a report summarizing the activity of the office, including a detailed breakdown showing which public education system individuals reported concerns about and the types of issues they needed help with. We will also use the report to define issues that require continuous monitoring for potential systemic reforms, as well as clear trends that require policy or operational changes. Whenever possible, the report will include responses from public education system representatives on issues identified as needing policy or operational change.

Cases by Public Education System

The Ombudsman provides support for parents, students, community members and personnel in the District's three public education systems: District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Public Charter Schools (PCS) and the University of the District of Columbia (UDC). Since beginning operation, we have responded to requests for support from 40 individuals. While we received a larger number of contacts, we referred several to other offices for resolution. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of the total number of cases by public education system. A majority of individuals seeking the Ombudsman's support, 34, reported concerns about DCPS. Public Charter Schools generated 4 cases and two individuals contacted the office about UDC

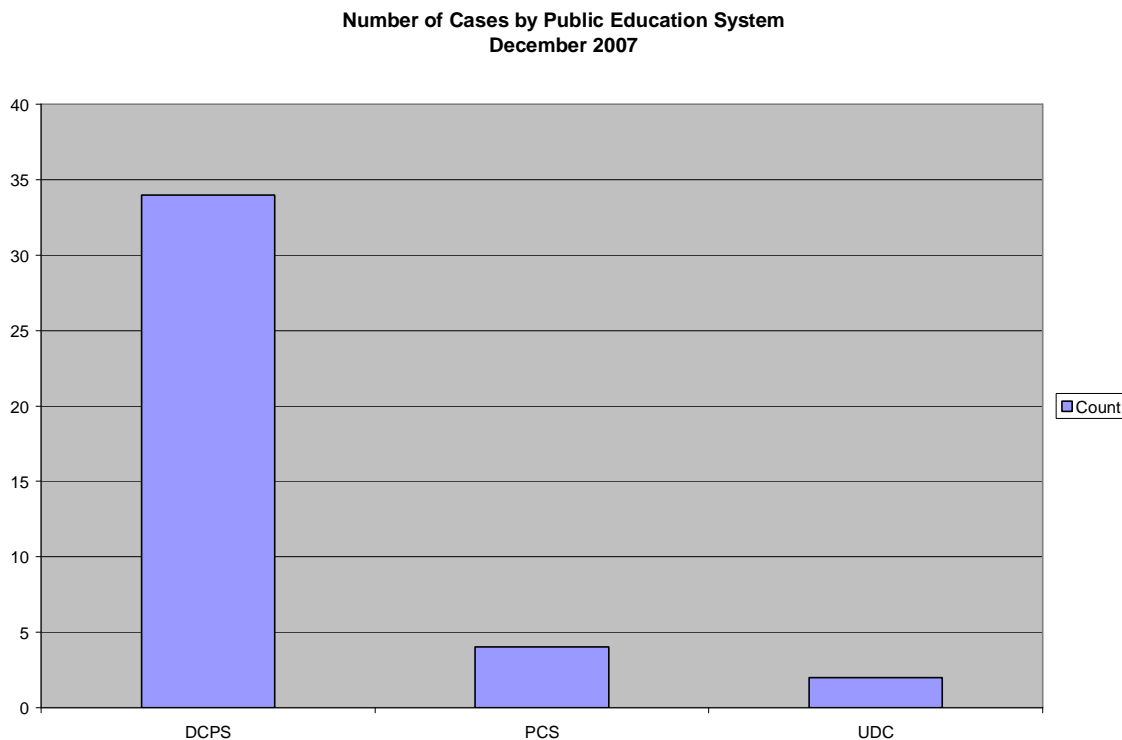


Figure 1 - Cases by Public Education System

Individuals can access the services of the Ombudsman through several avenues, including walk-in, phone, e-mail or fax. The Ombudsman is currently working with the Office of the Chief Technology Office (OCTO) to develop the capacity for website access. In December, 5 people visited the Office of the Ombudsman at 825 North Capitol Street, NE to present their issues personally. The Ombudsman received the majority of the other cases by phone and e-mail. The Office of the Deputy Mayor transferred 12 cases to the Ombudsman that remained unresolved after the transfer of responsibilities from that office.

The Ombudsman works to resolve cases quickly and efficiently. We work with the staff in DCPS, PCS and UDC to bring cases to resolution. In future months, the Ombudsman plans to close cases within 5 days of receiving all of the information necessary to develop an action plan. We are working with OCTO to develop the tracking mechanism to show the length of time taken to close a case. In December, the Ombudsman resolved 24 cases, and is working to resolve the remaining 16.

Cases by Issue

The Ombudsman monitors cases by issue to identify trends and the need for policy or operational intervention. Parents, students and staff of the public schools and university can bring cases to the Ombudsman. Table 1 defines the issue codes and shows the total number of cases received in December for each issue.

Table 1 – Case Code Definitions

Code	Definition	December Issue Total
PAM	Personnel Administrative	1
PAT	Personnel Termination	3
PPB	Personnel Pay/Benefits	5
PSH	Personnel Safety/Harassment	1
SAM	Student Administrative	11
SMD	Student Medical	3
SSE	Student Special Education	6
SSS	Student Safety/Abuse/Bullying	1
SST	Student Suspension Truancy	9

In total, only ten of the cases were personnel matters. Personnel pay and benefits were half of those cases. While the December personnel cases showed no reportable trends, timeliness, accuracy and equity in pay and benefits were among the issues brought by public school staff.

Student issues represent the vast majority of the cases brought to the Ombudsman for resolution. Thirty of the forty cases received were requests for intervention on student related issues. For students, administrative issues such as lost or inaccurate transcripts, lost Individual Education Plans (IEP) and inaccurate schedules represented the majority of cases. In this instance, the case involving the IEP was an administrative matter of finding the document to support an application for government benefits. Resolving these

types of issues is important to a student’s future. Failure to report transcript information or to locate IEPs can impact high school graduation, college admission or access to government benefits. The Ombudsman will continue to monitor this issue to determine what operational or policy changes the public schools need to adopt to establish more effective administrative support systems.

Figure 2 shows a breakdown of the December cases by issue and shows the percentage that each issue represents of the total number of cases. In future reports, the Ombudsman will report student and personnel related cases separately. However, the chart below shows all cases by issue code.

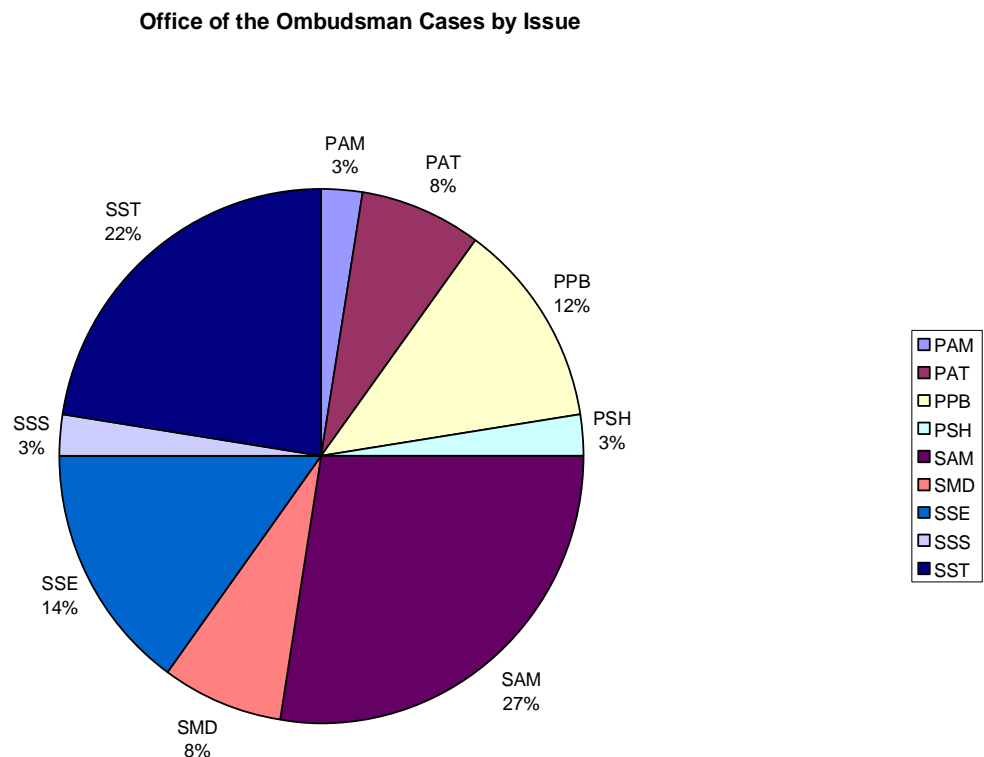


Figure 2 - Cases by Issue

Student suspension and truancy was the second highest source of cases brought to the Ombudsman. A total of 22 percent of all cases received were related to truancy and suspension. These cases included issues of suspensions longer than 10 days. In most of the suspension cases, the public school had referred the students to the alternative school, Choice, to maintain academic continuity. Efforts to resolve these cases revealed several areas for process improvements, personnel retraining and policy needs.

District law requires caretakers of children ages 5 to 18 to “place the minor in regular attendance” in an instructional setting during each year when the public schools of the

District are in session. Public schools are required to report student absences to parents and then to appropriate government agencies depending on the level of the truancy. In the cases where students were not attending school, the Ombudsman found that school officials did not properly report truancy. In cases where a student's local school had referred them to an alternative school, the Ombudsman found that the school system did not have an effective process to track whether the student reported to the alternative school. When the local school referred students with long suspensions to an alternative school, such as Choice, some parents refused to send the child to the alternative school. Finally, several parents reported that they were home schooling their child as an alternative to sending the child to Choice or to their local school. Most of those parents acknowledged that they had not contacted public school officials about home schooling.

The Office of the Ombudsman offers the following recommendations to improve DCPS and PCS schools tracking of student population:

1. DCPS and PCS should conduct a comprehensive assessment of the existing process for collecting and reporting student attendance information.
2. DCPS and PCS should conduct professional staff training on the student attendance process for all school-based administrative staff and teachers
3. DCPS and PCS should evaluate existing policies on long-term suspensions, assess the process for referring students to alternative education sites, and explore options for expanding the availability of alternative placements.
4. DCPS should improve coordination of referrals to alternative schools between the student's local school, the alternative school, hearing officers and instructional superintendents.
5. The Deputy Mayor for Education should work with the Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE) to develop a comprehensive policy on home schooling.

DCPS and OSSE Responses to Recommendations

The District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) system and the Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE) provided information on actions that each agency is already taking on the issues of truancy and home schooling.

Citywide, DCPS is coordinating with the Truancy Task Force – a group with representatives from city agencies, the court system, and charter schools to address the truancy problem. The Task Force is revising the suspension/expulsion policy and process, developing truancy protocols for elementary through secondary students, and clarifying mechanisms to engage community partners.

OSSE is currently drafting policies to establish a statewide system of truancy reduction, reporting and service provision for children who are truant or at-risk of truancy. In particular, OSSE is carefully considering the policies and protocols developed over several years by the collaborative, multi-agency Truancy Task Force. While DCPS has implemented many aspects of the reporting (and intervention) protocols developed by the

Task Force at the elementary school level, both DCPS and OSSE are reviewing ways to extend these to the secondary level. Additionally, OSSE intends to develop protocols that will extend truancy policies to all public schools in the District, including charter schools. OSSE is also assessing the necessary school-based and community-based resources; and drafting language and public information strategies to ensure that *all* schools, parents and students understand their respective responsibilities for school attendance, reporting and the available resources to support the reduction of rates of truancy in the District.

In addition to the Truancy Task Force, DCPS has representatives on the Reconnecting Disconnected Youth Committee, a sub-committee of ICSC. Work in this group includes improving intake services at the Focused Improvement Area “one-stop centers,” as well as connecting to more general efforts to identify youth who are out of school and out work, and to connect them with school and support services.

Within DCPS, there are several other initiatives underway:

- Conducting a massive effort to collect, clean, and analyze accurate attendance data
- Providing targeted support and oversight to help schools collect complete and consistent attendance information, every day
- Launched an intensive effort to follow-up with students who have missed over 50% of school days this year, unexcused (currently 667 students)
- Working to develop individual academic plans for 12 extremely over-aged 8th graders (they will turn 17 this year).
- Putting in place a Twilight Program to more fully engage over-aged middle school students for Spring 2008 semester
- Developing alternative programs for over-aged, under-credited high school students, to be piloted in Spring 2008 semester
- Expanding the scope and services of current alternative high school (Luke C. Moore)
- Opening new alternative high school in Fall 2008

DCPS is also taking the following steps to address issues related to long-term suspensions:

- Revising DCMR Title 5, Chapter 25 to clarify procedures for suspensions and expulsions
- Launching a training effort with all stakeholders to ensure solid, consistent implementation of the revised procedures
- Working closely with Instructional Superintendents and Principals to provide oversight for fair and consistent implementation of current discipline policies, while the system reforms the policies
- Looking into ways to expand CHOICE programs in the coming year, to minimize the number of students spending out-of-school suspension time outside of an educational setting

OSSE has drafted recommendations for consideration by the State Superintendent for defining home schooling in the District of Columbia and implementing policies for

oversight and support to home schooling residents. District policymakers based the recommendations on a scan of several states' policies, including our neighboring jurisdictions (Virginia, Maryland and Delaware), as well as states for which the District has adapted other policies and regulations (Massachusetts, Ohio). The recommended policies relate to (1) submission of notice of intent to home school; (2) parent/guardian qualifications to home school; (3) recordkeeping (attendance, student progress); (4) curriculum and assessment; and (5) state oversight of home instruction program.

Office of the Ombudsman Operations

After one full month of operation, the Office of the Ombudsman has established an operation at 825 North Capitol Street, NE in Suite 5002. Our co-location in DCPS headquarters provides easy access to administrators when we are working on issues related to the traditional schools. The office has three of four staff hired, and is close to finalizing staffing. The Ombudsman is engaged in a comprehensive effort to meet with representatives of all District government agencies that interact with children. Developing a relationship with these agencies will help when a family's need requires supports outside of the public school system. Finally, the Ombudsman is gearing up to conduct a public engagement campaign to inform the community about the services available through the office.